

“Teachers’ perceptions on frequent and serious mistakes in students’ writings. The case of the Course of Studies in Translation (English)”

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Introduction

The aim of this research was to identify teachers’ perceptions on type and frequency of mistakes when assessing students’ writings. There seems to be a mismatch between teachers’ preconceptions in terms of students’ difficulties in certain linguistic domains and the type of mistake that prevails in their writings. It is presumed that much of the work conducted to recover those failings is not always oriented to correcting or eradicating those most significant mistakes.

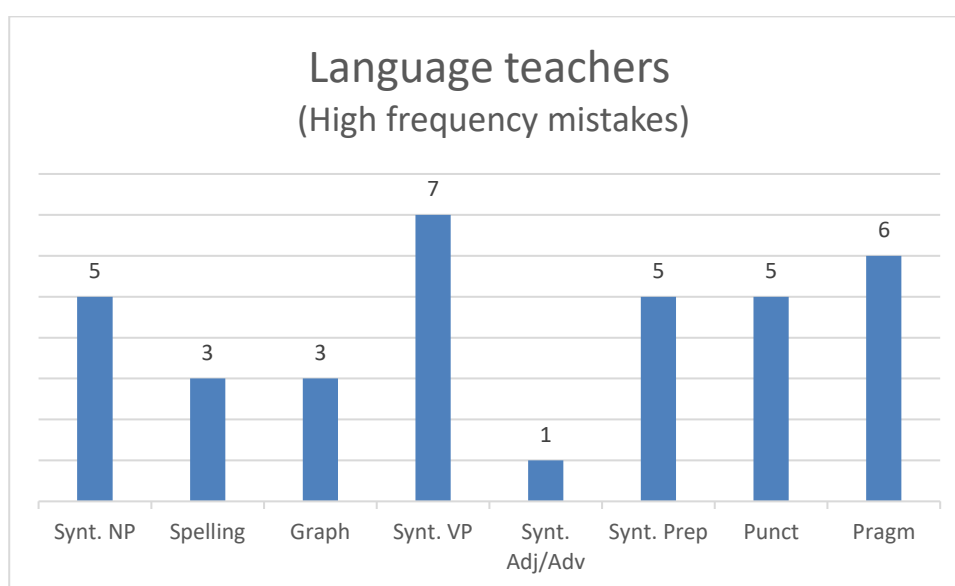
This research was conducted in four universities: two state-run ones and two private ones. Two different types of self-administered questionnaires were designed. One was addressed to Language teachers. They were expected to rank mistakes made by students in writing in terms of frequency of occurrence, to state what type/s of mistakes they believe to affect the quality of the written work, and to state which mistakes, and to what extent, they considered serious. Six other questions asked them to identify (in type and frequency of occurrence) the correction strategies they used both for highly frequent mistakes and for serious mistakes, to state the number of mistakes they counted for failing writings, as well as to what extent the assessing criteria was shared with students. The other questionnaire was administered to teachers who taught subjects in English -other than Language. They were expected to answer the same first three questions as Language teachers.

Data Analysis

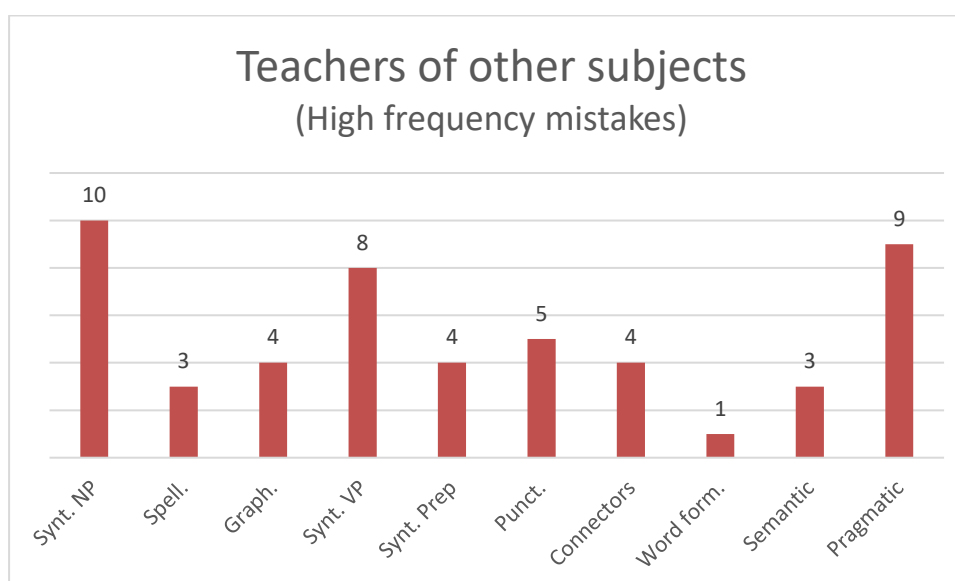
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The first question in both questionnaires requested respondents to indicate the frequency of occurrence of mistakes in their students' writings. Respondents were provided with a chart that included 12 different types of mistakes where they had to rank those mistakes assigning number 1 to the most frequent mistake and number 12 to the least frequent. In order to have a clearer view of the data collected, we decided to segment respondents' ranking of mistakes into three different categories: "high frequency mistakes" (for mistakes ranked 1,2,3 or 4), "regular frequency mistakes" (for mistakes ranked 5, 6, 7 or 8) and "low frequency mistakes" (for mistakes ranked 9 to 12).

As can be interpreted in the answers provided by Language teachers, we may say that the mistakes signalled with the highest frequency of occurrence are syntax mistakes in verb phrases (20%) together with pragmatic mistakes (17,14%) but the mistakes that seem to appear more often if we consider the total number of occurrences (48%) are mistakes in Syntax (in particular, in noun phrases or Prepositional phrases) as well as in punctuation (the three types of mistakes being signalled with the same number of responses).



In the analysis of responses given by teachers of other subjects we found that the mistakes signalled with the highest frequency of occurrence are syntactic mistakes in noun phrases (19,6%), pragmatic mistakes (17,64%) and syntactic mistakes in verb phrases (15,68%).



We then compared the responses provided by the two groups of respondents to question number one. We found (as can be seen in the chart below) that both groups assigned very similar values to same types of mistakes, not only when considering “high frequency mistakes” but also when considering “low frequency” ones.

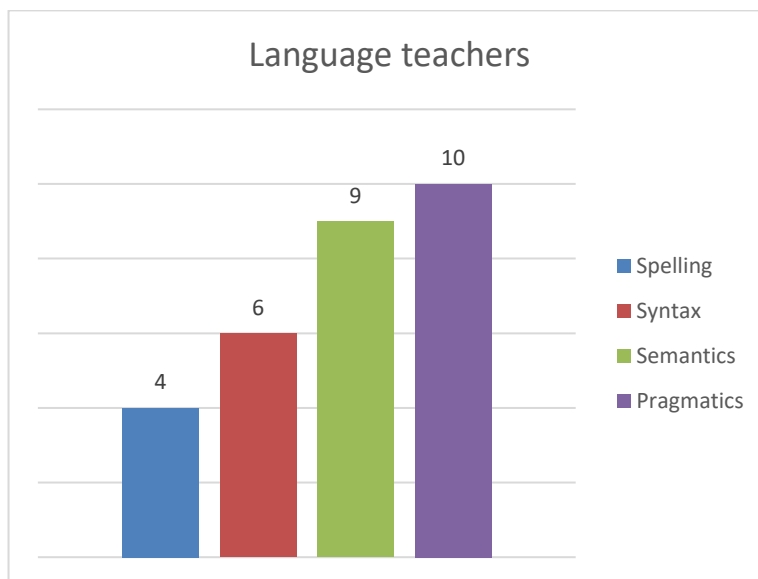
	Language Teachers		Teachers of other subjects		All respondents		% of “high frequency” mistakes
Mayor Frecuencia	Syntax (VP)	7	Syntax (VP)	8	15	22,4	80,63
	Pragmatics	6	Pragmatics	9	15	22,4	
	Syntax (NP)	5	Syntax (NP)	10	15	22,4	
	Syntax (PP)	5	Syntax (PP)	4	9	13,43	
	Punctuation	5	Graph.	4			
			Connect.	4			
TOTAL =100% with highest frequency					67		
							% of “lowest frequency” mistakes
Lowest frequency	Syntax (Adj/Adv.P)	7	Syntax (Adj/Adv.P)	9	16	29,1	75,75
	Graph.	6	Graph.	8	14	25,45	
	Word formation	5	Word formation	7	12	21,2	
	Connect.	5	Spelling	8			
TOTAL =100% with “lowest frequency”					55		

In question number two, respondents were asked to respond to what extent those mistakes that are frequently made by students seriously affect both communication and quality in their writings.

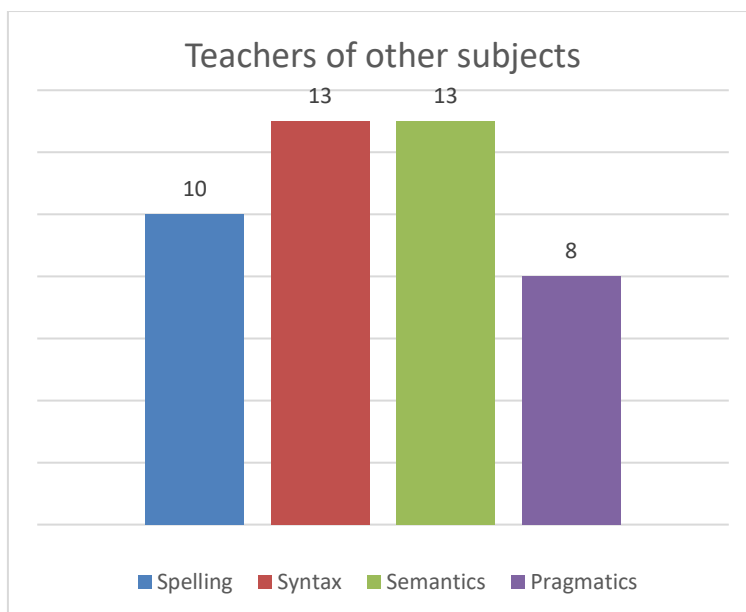
In question number three, they were asked to inform, out of a given set of possibilities, which mistakes they considered serious mistakes. It is worth noticing that none of the respondents attempted at adding any other type of mistake to the list provided, which makes us believe that the types of mistakes we purposefully left out of that list were not considered by respondents as very serious mistakes.

Interestingly enough, in question number two, Language teachers responded that the type of mistakes that to a greater extent affect students’ writings are pragmatic mistakes and semantic mistakes. Pragmatic mistakes were also marked in question number one as a type of mistake of very high frequency of occurrence but at no point did any respondent consider semantic mistakes as “of

high frequency”, nonetheless, semantic mistakes appear as having great influence when assessing students’ writings.



In the same question, teachers of other subjects also provided responses that do not match their answers to question number one. Again, they assign great weight to semantic mistakes, in fact, as much weight as to syntactic mistakes, followed by spelling mistakes and then by pragmatic mistakes.



Data is still being analysed. This report is not conclusive but based on the preliminary readings of the information gathered in all questionnaires, we can attempt to say that many of the correction strategies might not lead to correcting or eradicating mistakes made by students in their writings.

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